

# The Struggle for Hearts and Souls That Fatah Must Win

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## Articles & Testimony

**O**n December 29, 2006, the Financial Times published the following letter to the editor from Institute counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow Dennis Ross.

Sir, Having recently spent several days in Jerusalem and Ramallah, I am struck by the struggle that is now under way for the heart and soul of the Palestinians and their cause. The protagonists are Fatah and Hamas, who are ostensibly competing over who will govern the Palestinians and how they will do it.

To hear the members of Fatah tell it, this is not a simple competition over the spoils of governing. Instead, in their words, it is nothing less than a struggle pitting those who believe that their future should be governed by a secular rule of law and coexistence on the one hand and on the other those who see themselves pursuing an Islamist agenda -- one that offers no prospect of secular government, no solace for minorities and no hope for peace.

Perhaps, those in Fatah exaggerate. But before disparaging their claims, look at how Hamas has behaved to this point. Notwithstanding Hamas' claims that the international aid cut-off has denied it a fair chance, it is Hamas that has been unwilling to work with non-Hamas members in ministries; it is Hamas that accepted and then backed away from the national unity agreement that Ismail Haniya, its prime minister, had concluded with Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority -- an agreement that members of the Quartet, including the US, were prepared to recognise and use as a basis to resume assistance; it was Hamas that kidnapped an Israeli soldier on June 25, at a time when it knew Mr Abbas had an understanding with Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, to release large numbers of Palestinian prisoners; and it is Hamas that defiantly declares that it will never recognise or live in peace with Israel.

Mr Abbas outlined many of these failings in his December 16 speech, in which he called for early elections. Hamas rejected his call, declaring it a thinly veiled coup attempt against its government.

While there are some who believe that Fatah and Hamas will yet reconcile, don't count on it. They see each other in zero-sum terms. Hamas is using the money it smuggles into Gaza and the West Bank, not to meet the needs of the Palestinian public, but to extend its grass roots organisation and build its infrastructure for the future. Fatah's members, though still divided between an old and young guard, increasingly understand that they must draw the line, counter Hamas growth and credibly reach out to the Palestinian public.

Will Fatah succeed? Can it provide social services and deliver what Hamas now fails to produce for the Palestinian public? Can it offer hope for the future? Stay tuned. Much depends on Fatah getting its own act together. Much also depends on whether the outside world -- the Arab states, the Israelis, the US and the European Union -- will help Fatah compete. The stakes are high. The Bush administration would be wise to realise that its most important objective in the next two years is to ensure that Hamas loses this competition. Otherwise, for the longer term, even the hope for peace will be lost.

Dennis Ross Washington, DC ❖

Financial Times

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